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As virus delays climate summit, youth 'Mock COP' takes (virtual) floor

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Body

By Laurie Goering

LONDON, Nov 9 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Earlier in 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic forced a year's delay to planned U.N. climate talks in Glasgow - originally set to start on Monday - young climate activists chafed that no innovative way could be found to hold the COP26 summit online.

"Then somebody said, out of the blue, 'Why don't we do our own?'" remembered Josh Tregale, 18, a British student whose final-year school exams were canceled as a result of the virus.

On Nov. 19, after months of organizing, Tregale and others will launch the two-week "Mock COP," designed to mirror the format of the delayed U.N. talks, but with youth from more than 140 nations as the negotiators.

The online event will focus on themes including climate education, carbon targets, **climate justice**, health and green jobs, and aims to produce a negotiated outcome statement in the same legal format as the official talks.

"It's about us saying, 'We'd like you to listen. We can be more than token young people. We have learned enough about climate change that we could put things in place ourselves'," said Tregale, who postponed starting an engineering degree at Imperial College London for a year to help organize the summit.

The negotiations will "illustrate what we would do ourselves if we had a seat at the table," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in a telephone interview.

The event comes as young climate activists have struggled to maintain momentum under COVID-19 restrictions that have made 2019's high-profile, millions-strong street marches impossible.

While youth activists have pushed ahead with online campaigning, they have had limited influence on key issues such as how virus-hit nations spend trillions of dollars in pandemic stimulus spending, much of which has not supported green aims.

A surge in disasters fueled by climate change - from wildfires to floods and hurricanes - meanwhile, is driving a growing sense of urgency and frustration.

'WE ARE TALKING ABOUT HUMANS'

Sofia Hernández Salazar, 22, one of the Mock COP organizers from Costa Rica, said powerful Hurricane Eta destroyed so many roads there this month that she could not travel from the rural area where she has been staying to the capital.

"When we talk about the climate crisis, we are talking about humans," she said.

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A political science student with a focus on human rights, she first became aware of climate risks while volunteering with a non-governmental organization assisting refugees and migrants.

"I was reading about how climate change was going to impact migration," she recalled - something that led her to join the Fridays for Future school strike movement launched by Swedish teen climate activist Greta Thunberg.

Hernández now aims to become a climate diplomat - with Costa Rican former U.N. climate chief Christiana Figueres as her role model - and push action on what she sees as key issues, such as rising uncompensated "loss and damage" from climate disasters.

"We are not afraid," she said of youth activists. "Sometimes the issue with our voices is we are being heard, but not taken into account," she added.

Dom Jaramillo, 21, an Ecuadorian delegate to the Mock COP, said the event - unlike the usual U.N. climate talks - plans to give a particularly strong say to developing-world delegates and those most affected by climate impacts.

Britain's Tregale said richer countries were allowed up to three delegates for the event, while developing countries were allocated up to five places.

Jaramillo, the daughter of banana farmers and one of the summit organizers, called it "a great opportunity to hear the voiceless, those most affected by the climate crisis."

She laughed at the idea that "everyone says we're the leaders of the future."

"I find myself leading things in the present," she noted, as the urgency for climate action grows.

SPENDING 'OUR MONEY'

Tregale said the first week of the youth-led talks would focus on panel discussions and speeches to help participants and listeners - the event is open to the public - learn more about climate issues and solutions.

The delegates, most in their teens or 20s and many still in school, will then begin negotiating an outcome, which they hope could feed into broader climate policy or be used to lobby their own governments for greater ambition.

The event also aims to be a model of what is possible with low-carbon online negotiations. Regular COP meetings, with delegates flying in from around the world, can produce 50,000 or more tonnes of climate-changing emissions, Tregale said.

The Mock COP, by contrast, will produce emissions "in the tens" of tonnes, he said.

Most delegates see the push for climate action - and the effects of the coronavirus pandemic - as an intensely personal struggle, said Tregale.

He stepped up his involvement after a failed effort to hold his local authorities to account for investments in fossil fuels.

"It's young people who will graduate into an economy that's really struggling" because of the pandemic, he said.

"Young people will pay the tax to pay off the (economic stimulus and climate) decisions we make now. It's effectively our money they're spending at the moment... (and) young people should have a voice, especially at this time," he added.

For him, the Mock COP should at least change views of what young activists are capable of doing rather than being perceived as little more than an inspiration for older officials.

"People will have seen that (we) care, and that we can do more than just strike and protest," he said. (Reporting by Laurie Goering //news.trust.org/climate) !@COPYRIGHT=© 2020 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

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